

Writing a SONNET like Shakespeare



You want to know [how to write a sonnet](#) like one of Shakespeare's?

The good news is that it's [very easy](#) to write a sonnet! Remember our Heroic Quatrain work? Well now we are building on a simple ABAB pattern.

A Shakespearean sonnet expresses a single idea, but it is generally an idea that develops and expands leading to a conclusion – and all within a very specific rhyming scheme. The sonnet structure consists of four verses, always making up fourteen lines. The first three of the four sonnet divisions have the same rhyming scheme, whilst the fourth and last division has a different rhyming scheme:

1. The Shakespearean sonnet begins with a four-line quatrain – four lines that end with alternate rhyming words, in this pattern: ABAB
2. The second quatrain has the same rhyme scheme but with different rhyming words so it follows this pattern: CDCD
3. The third quatrain also has the same rhyme scheme, but again with different rhyming words: EFEF
4. The final two lines is a rhyming couplet: GG

Your rhyme pattern will look like this: abab/ cdcd/efef/gg

Let's look at a Shakespeare [sonnet 18](#) to understand how the rhyming works, and how the message evolves:

First quatrain

/Shall I /compare /thee to /a Sum/mer's day?/ a

/Thou art/ more lovely and/ more temp/er/ate:/ b
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, a
And Summer's lease hath all too short a date: b
 Second quatrain
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, c
And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd; d
And every fair from fair sometime declines, c
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd: d
 Third quatrain
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade e
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest; f
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade, e
When in eternal lines to time thou growest: f
 Couplet
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, g
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. G

The sonnet is about a single idea. Shakespeare is looking at a beautiful summer's day which, in spite of its beauty, has limitations, and it eventually fades and dies. He's comparing someone with that beautiful summer's day but showing that person's superiority to it. He works the idea through and presents the subject of the poem as having no limitations. Even eventual death won't interfere with that because the subject will live forever in the poem, which Shakespeare suggests, will be read as long as there are people to read it.

So – here is some TOP TIPS for writing your own Shakespearean Sonnet.

1. Think of an idea for your sonnet

It must be just one single idea. It could be a feeling, it could be some thought you've had about life, or about a person or about people in general. It could be about one of your favourite subjects – sport, music, movies, nature, a book you've read etc.

2. Your sonnet must rhyme

There must be three sets of four lines and one set of two lines.

A set of four lines is called a quatrain. They must follow this pattern. The first quatrain will rhyme like this: abab, for example, rain, space, pain, trace.

In the second quatrain you will use different words and it will rhyme like this: cdcd, for example, run, sky, sun, die.

In the third quatrain you will use different words again and it will rhyme like this: efef, for example, boy, man, joy, van.

You now have your three Shakespearean quatrains. That's twelve lines. A sonnet always has fourteen lines. You need a final two and they are called a couplet. So far your sonnet has three quatrains. Once you have written them the sonnet needs a couplet. The rhyme pattern for that is gg. Again, words you haven't used in the rhyming so far. An example is owl and fowl.

A rhyming couplet in English poetry is always very powerful and in the sonnets it sums up and rounds off the poem.

3. Your sonnet must have a metrical pattern

It must be written in [iambic pentameter](#). That means that you must use iambus.

Iambus is another word for a two syllable foot. The first syllable will normally be unstressed and the second stressed. For example, de/light, the sun, for/lorn, one day, re/lease. English is the perfect language for iambus because of the way our stressed and unstressed syllables work.

Every line of your sonnet must have five feet or iambi. Pentameter means five and iambic pentameter simply means five feet. Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter, not only in the sonnets, but also throughout his plays. Pick up any play and look at it. Choose almost any line: 'But screw your courage to the sticking post' (Lady Macbeth) Read it like this: /but screw/ your cour/age to /the stick/ing post/ Count the feet – there are five. And they are all unstressed followed by stressed syllables. Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter because it closely resembles the rhythm of everyday speech and he wants to imitate everyday speech in his plays.

Like Shakespeare you can also trot them out. Try it. You can practice talking to each other in iambic pentameter. It comes easily. 'I wonder what my friends will think of this?' 'If I were you I'd watch out what I say.' 'He never ever told me what to do.' 'It's easy when you think of it like that.'

You can see from the above sentences that iambic pentameter is natural to [English speech](#). So the first thing to do is practice speaking in iambic pentameter. You'll see how naturally it comes.

You now have to put the three things together – your idea, your rhyming words and your iambic pentameter.

Things to think about

- Use as many visual images (word pictures) as you can
- Find the right words.
- Don't deviate from the iambic pentameter or your sonnet won't work. You can make slight variations in the stressing for the sake of varying the rhythm so that you don't get too much of a dedum-dedum-dedum-dedum-dedum effect. For example: 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds.' If you read it like this: /let me /not to /the mar/riage of /true minds/ it sounds unnatural, but it is still iambic pentameter. Shakespeare has used iambic pentameter but he's varied the meter to create a different rhythm. So although it's basic iambic pentameter we read it with the following stresses: Let me not to the marriage of true minds. It now sounds like natural speech. Notice how the first three words run into each other as though they're one word letmenot. But he's stuck rigidly to the required line structure. Do you think you can do that? Shakespeare makes these variations a lot in his plays and that's why you can hear the language as real people speak it but feel the basic metre in your head.

Now you know how to write a sonnet, there's no excuse: It's time to start work on your own sonnet! Send them in for your teacher to read, we would love to see them.